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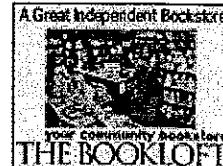
Dewey Academy is sued over OTHER ARTICLES IN THIS SECTION teacher-student affair

8/26/2004

By [Derek Gentile](#)
Berkshire Eagle Staff

GREAT BARRINGTON -- A former student at the John Dewey Academy is suing the private therapeutic boarding school and some of its officials, including headmaster Thomas Bratter, for allegedly failing to properly oversee a female teacher who enticed the student into a sexual relationship.

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The civil suit was filed last week in U.S. District Court in Boston by the Boston law firm of Brody, Hardoon, Perkins & Kesten.

The defendants are listed as John Dewey Academy, Bratter, dean of students Kenneth Steiner and Gwendolyn Hampton, a former teacher.

The suit was filed by former student Adam Helfand and his parents, Mitchell and Caron Helfand, all of Buckland, Ill.

The Helfands are seeking to be compensated for personal injury, emotional distress, breach of contract, reasonable attorney's fees and punitive fees. No specific figure was requested in the suit, but the Helfands contend they spent \$110,000 on the education of their son at Dewey Academy.

Contacted yesterday, Bratter denied the claims in the suit. As soon as he and Steiner were made aware of the relationship, he said, the school fired Hampton.

"We take very seriously our position as role models for our students," said Bratter. "Had we had any suspicion that this was happening, we would have terminated that employee immediately."

Hampton could not be reached for comment yesterday.

The suit contends that Bratter and Steiner failed to properly supervise Hampton, a Spanish teacher who was also assigned as Helfand's clinician.

Helfand was admitted to Dewey Academy in 1999 after being expelled from high school in Illinois for drug and alcohol abuse.

In the spring of 2000, Helfand and Hampton began a sexual relationship when Helfand was 18 and Hampton was 28. Hampton had been hired by Dewey Academy in the mid-1990s, according to the suit.

According to the suit, Hampton was entrusted with counseling the young man. Instead, she regularly gave Helfand alcohol, encouraged his use of drugs and had sexual relations with him at her home in Great Barrington and in the school car.

After Helfand graduated in 2001, the relationship continued. In June 2002,

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with Helfand in college, the couple had a child, which was later placed for adoption, according to the suit.

Helfand was of legal age, and Massachusetts law does not prohibit teachers from having sexual relationships with their students if the students are 16 or older. No charges were ever filed against Hampton.

However, the lawsuit contends that students and staff were aware of the relationship between Helfand and Hampton, and that the school did nothing to investigate or stop it, a charge Bratter angrily denies.

Lawrence E. Hardoon, who filed the lawsuit on behalf of the Helfands, is a former state prosecutor who has handled sexual abuse cases.

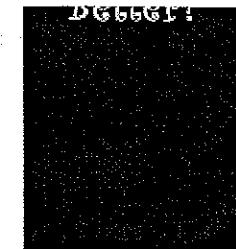
He said he believes that state law should be expanded to make it illegal for teachers to have sex with their students, even if those students are 16 or older.

"Actually, I don't disagree with that," said Bratter yesterday. "The law should be changed."

This is the second time a Dewey Academy official has been charged with having an inappropriate relationship with a student.

In 1995, Bratter pleaded no contest in Connecticut to a charge of second-degree unlawful restraint, which involved an alleged relationship with a 17-year-old girl. However, the charges lodged by the girl in the same case in Massachusetts were dropped.

The Dewey Academy, a coeducational, college preparatory therapeutic boarding school, was founded by Bratter in 1985. The annual tuition at the school, which houses its students year-round, is \$65,000.



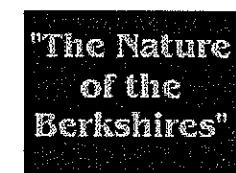
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The suit contends that students and staff were aware of the relationship between Hampton and Helfand, yet officials never thoroughly investigated it and failed to properly supervise or discipline Hampton.

Helfand ended his relationship with Hampton last year after telling his parents about it, according to Hardoon.

The suit alleges that Hampton was unqualified to provide mental health counseling services and that her relationship with Helfand caused him severe and permanent mental distress.

Hardoon, a former state prosecutor who handled sexual abuse cases, said state law should be expanded to make it illegal for teachers to have sexual relationships with high school students, including those over age 16.

"It's not a crime, but it should be," Hardoon said. "Students are often vulnerable to adolescent crushes and other difficult-to-control feelings that involve their teachers and it really is highly inappropriate for a high school teacher to be engaging a high school student in a relationship."

Hardoon also noted that it's not the first time a school official at John Dewey Academy, which has a student population that varies from 15 to 30, has been accused of having an inappropriate sexual relationship with a student.

In 1995, Bratter pleaded no contest in Connecticut to a state charge of second-degree unlawful restraint, which involved his relationship with a 17-year-old girl. As part of his plea agreement, he received a suspended one-year sentence and was required to perform 500 hours of community service and donate \$50,000 to a charity that dealt with victims of crime or abuse.

Bratter founded John Dewey Academy in 1985. The coeducational college preparatory boarding school's website says its mission is "to provide intensive, individualized instruction and therapy to alienated, angry, self-destructive, but bright adolescents."

Tuition at the school, which is housed in Searles Castle, is \$65,000 for 52 weeks, a fee that includes \$23,000 for therapy.

Shelley Murphy can be reached at shmurphy@globe.com. ■

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A group of students had lunch on the patio of Searles Castle at the John Dewey Academy. Some students say that they feel betrayed after the sexual assault suit was filed. (Globe Photo / Nancy Palmieri)

Teacher in abuse suit defends actions

The Boston Globe

At Dewey Academy, feelings of betrayal

By Shelley Murphy, Globe Staff | September 14, 2004

GREAT BARRINGTON — At a private boarding school for troubled teenagers in this small town in the Berkshires, Gwendolyn Hampton earned respect as a seemingly devoted Spanish teacher, counselor, houseparent, and single mother.

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But students and staff at John Dewey Academy said they now feel betrayed by Hampton after a federal civil lawsuit was filed in Boston last month alleging that she had a secret, sexual relationship with one of her students and had at least one child by him.

Wiping away tears during an interview in her backyard, Hampton said she is humiliated by the case, which has jeopardized her career as a teacher. She insisted that she did not have sex with Adam Helfand, the student who filed the suit, until after he graduated in 2001.

"I didn't believe I did anything wrong," said Hampton, 32, who is 10 years older than Helfand. "I feel I was good for Adam in the time I had a relationship with him. I certainly wasn't luring or enticing anyone."

But Helfand, who responded to several questions from a reporter via e-mail, said he was midway through his junior year at Dewey Academy when Hampton "enticed me with alcohol, drugs, and sex."

As his teacher, boss, and therapist, Hampton "controlled every aspect of my life at John Dewey," Helfand wrote. "She did not help me. She further exacerbated problems that I already had and created more emotional problems that I will now have to deal with for the rest of my life."

Helfand, who was expelled from an Illinois high school in 1999 for using drugs and alcohol, was supposed to be getting

help for his problems at Dewey. Instead, he said, Hampton gave him alcohol and prescription pills.

"We would smoke marijuana together, as well," he said in his e-mail, adding that other former students were sometimes present "when we were getting high and drunk."

Hampton denied ever giving alcohol to Helfand or encouraging him to use drugs. But she said she did sometimes drink alcohol in her home, despite rules at Dewey Academy that required its teachers to refrain from alcohol or drug use at any time.

Though Hampton said she did not believe her relationship with Helfand was wrong, she said she did not feel completely "comfortable" when it turned sexual and did not tell people about it.

After getting pregnant twice, Hampton said she hid her pregnancies from everyone at the school by wearing loose-fitting clothes to work.

While Helfand and Hampton agreed to give their first daughter up for adoption in June 2002, Hampton said she never told him that she gave birth to a second daughter by him on Sept. 17, 2003, because he had broken off their relationship six months earlier. She said she's raising that child on her own, along with her older children, who are 12 and 14. [Continued...](#)

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A group of students had lunch on the patio of Searles Castle at the John Dewey Academy. Some students say that they feel betrayed after the sexual assault suit was filed. (Globe Photo / Nancy Palmieri)

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September 14, 2004

Page 2 of 4 – Hampton's lawyer, Joseph Elder of Hartford, said he plans to seek child support from the Helfands for the baby born last year.

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Laurence E. Hardoon of Boston, the lawyer who represents the Helfands, said the family would ask for a paternity test to determine whether the child is Adam Helfand's.

Hampton also said that more than two years ago, Helfand and his aunt urged her to join him in filing a suit against John Dewey Academy, but that she refused.

Hampton said Helfand wanted her to support his false allegation that their sexual relationship began when he was a student, promising that he would give her a share of any money he might get from the case and that she would be "set for life."

Hardoon called Hampton's version ridiculous and said she had distorted a conversation in which Helfand's aunt was upset after learning that her nephew had a baby with his teacher. Helfand also said the conversation had been distorted.

Hampton has not been charged with any criminal wrongdoing. The age of consent for sexual relations is 16 in Massachusetts, and it is not illegal for a teacher to have a sexual relationship with a student who is at least that age. However, school districts strictly forbid such relationships. The suit alleges that Helfand was 18 when the sexual relationship began.

Hampton said she is teaching at another private high school, which she would not identify, but the Department of Education has refused to issue her certification because of the pending civil suit. She said she's afraid she'll lose her job and currently has no health insurance for her children.

The civil suit accuses Hampton of "counseling malpractice." It alleges that Dewey Academy, its president and founder Thomas Bratter, and dean Kenneth Steiner were negligent in failing to supervise Hampton.

Bratter said he was unaware of the relationship between Hampton and Helfand and had received letters from the young man's parents praising the school for supporting their son and helping him get into college.

"If I had known about the relationship I would have fired her immediately," Bratter said.

Hampton was forced to leave the school last September after the Helfands' lawyers sent a letter to Bratter alerting him to the allegations.

Mitchell and Caron Helfand paid \$110,000 to send their son to Dewey for two years after he was expelled from the Illinois high school. The suit alleges that Hampton had sex with Adam Helfand in a school car and at her home.

Hampton said she developed a very close relationship with Helfand because she was asked to do too many things: teaching him, serving as his primary counselor, and overseeing him when he worked in the school's kitchen. She often called him to her house to baby-sit or to do chores, and he became very close with her family. *Continued...*

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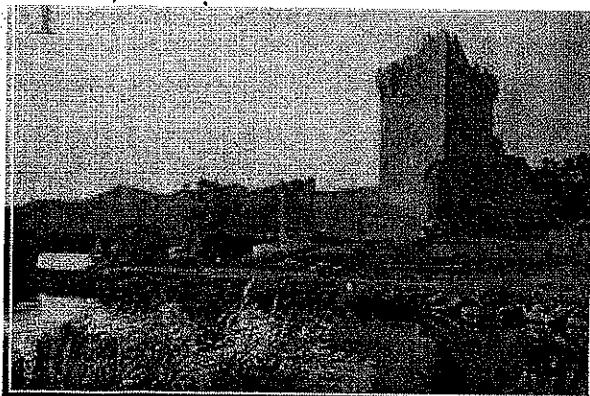
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A group of students had lunch on the patio of Searles Castle at the John Dewey Academy. Some students say that they feel betrayed after the sexual assault suit was filed. (Globe Photo / Nancy Palmieri)

Teacher in abuse suit defends actions

September 14, 2004

Page 3 of 4 — "The boundaries were blurred; I was his lifeline," Hampton said, adding that she became very close with Helfand's family as well.

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She said they paid for her and her two children to visit their home in Illinois in December 2000 and in June 2001 and often gave her gifts. She also said that through her efforts, a rift between Helfand and his brother was mended.

When the relationship turned sexual, Hampton said they discussed their age differences and she told him: "This is probably something that is not going to be long-lasting. We are in two different phases in our lives."

According to Hampton, Helfand ended their relationship via e-mail in March 2003 after confiding the details of their affair — including the baby and the adoption — to his parents. He had also learned that Hampton had told his parents that she believed he continued to have a drug problem.

Still, even now, Hampton insists that she did nothing wrong or illegal and that she cared deeply for Helfand. "I didn't see myself as going out with a kid," she said. "I brought out the best in him. He made grown-up decisions, mature decisions."

But that's not the way Helfand sees it.

"She did not do anything to help me," he said in his e-mail. "She furthered any problems I already had and added emotional issues that I deal with on a daily basis." He wouldn't comment on the babies, but said, "There is not a day that goes by that I am not affected by what happened at John Dewey."

Haroon said: "There is an enormous breach of trust because the parents really embraced her as someone they believed was helping their son. They really opened their hearts to her as somebody they thought was doing good things for their son. They had no idea that any of this was going on behind their backs."

That sense of betrayal is also felt at the school, which is housed in the majestic Searles Castle, a mansion built in the 1880s by Mary Frances Hopkins Searles, then one of the richest women in the world. It is now home to 29 high school students, many of whom said their lives have been transformed by the program built on intense confrontational therapy and academics.

Matthew Sinsheimer, a 17-year-old student, credits Hampton's counseling sessions with helping him give up his dishonest and manipulative ways and learn to tell the truth.

"I feel as if she was very hypocritical," Sinsheimer said. "She did something that is almost unforgiveable, that is very dangerous for the school. She didn't think of the consequences of her actions; she never followed her own advice."

Still, he admits he cares for Hampton and hopes she will be all right. [Continued...](#)

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A group of students had lunch on the patio of Searles Castle at the John Dewey Academy. Some students say that they feel betrayed after the sexual assault suit was filed. (Globe Photo / Nancy Palmieri)

Teacher in abuse suit defends actions

September 14, 2004

Page 4 of 4 – Diana Gittelman, a divorce mediator and lawyer who teaches law part-time at Dewey Academy, said that nobody at the school had a clue that Hampton was pregnant. "It blows my mind, because I think of myself as an intelligent, sophisticated woman," she said.

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Gittelman said it would be unfair if the lawsuit damages the school, because it has been so successful at helping "out-of-control" teenagers turn their lives around and go to college.

The suit has also cast a spotlight on Bratter, who has been accused in the past of having inappropriate sexual contact with two female students.

In 1995, Bratter pleaded no contest in Connecticut to a state charge of second-degree unlawful restraint, which involved his relationship with a 17-year-old girl. As part of a plea agreement, he received a suspended one-year sentence and was required to perform 500 hours of community service and donate \$50,000 to a charity that helped victims of crime or abuse. The father of the girl later filed a civil suit against Bratter, which was settled out of court.

After being charged with indecent assault and battery on a 17-year-old girl in 1999 in Great Barrington, Bratter pleaded guilty to assault and battery in June 2002. He was placed on probation and ordered not to have unsupervised contact with girls under 18.

Bratter said he had put his hand on the girl's knee while trying to comfort her as they drove to a local store in his car, but he said she falsely accused him of putting his hand on her thigh.

He said he pleaded guilty in both cases because his lawyer advised him to, but vehemently denies ever having an inappropriate relationship with a student.

An admittedly brash and unorthodox leader, Bratter said he's been happily married for 41 years and would never do anything to harm a student.

Lisa Sinsheimer, a New York City physician who frequently volunteers at the school and heads the parents' group, said Bratter is devoted to students and has made himself vulnerable by running a school that takes in students who don't

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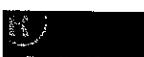
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always tell the truth," he said. "He's a good teacher. He's a good person. He's a good man."

"When a kid comes to this school, he doesn't give up on them," said Sinsheimer, adding that Bratter is known to hug students, who often refer to him as Uncle Tom.

During one of the weekly confrontational group therapy sessions at the school, where staff and students gather in a circle, Hampton acknowledged that she was questioned about why Helfand continued to visit her so much after he graduated and whether the relationship was appropriate.

She said, "I said he was having a hard time adjusting to [college] and I was support for him, which was true." ■

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